

Tenacity of the Species

The realization hit me like a slap in the face; I'm the last of my species.

Then again humans were never meant to survive long as the dominant life form. Unlike the dinosaurs that ruled for millions of years, our tenure on top of the food chain was marked by centuries of wars and genocides. Our selfish, egotistical nature produced green house gases and polluted oceans. Well into the twenty-first century, disease and malnutrition still exacted an annual toll. Only the romantics among us harboured any notion of uniting the planet, perhaps even employ technology to push our civilization to the next level.

But the idea that mankind could put aside its differences and expand off planet was probably magical thinking, It just took the aliens to quash the idea for good.

From the frigid confines of a rat-infested cave on the outskirts of a destroyed city, I hurled curses at them. It was their incredible technology, and ruthless purpose that pushed my species to the brink of extinction. In a few short months, they destroyed what millions of years of evolution had carefully forged.

Even now mechanical and biological units searched the ruins of the city. They would never stop until they exterminated us all. I had eluded them for months but now, like the fox at the end of a chase, my battered body screamed for rest. I ran my hand along the jagged rock wall and shivered as the cold penetrated the tattered remains of my uniform. Dripping water echoed in the dark, and the smell of death lingered in the heavy air like an omniscient poison. The Coleman still worked and I managed to coax a small, blue flame into existence. In the gloom, it resembled a beacon of hope. Like Earth before the war.

A warped tin cup was all I had to scoop water from a stream that snaked across the cavern floor. I placed the cup on the burner and paused to soak up some heat with my hands. The small flame twisted

and jumped and, in its dance, my mind saw silhouettes of fantastic alien ships and indestructible machines.

Initially detected by Hubble, the spherical objects entering our solar system were too perfect to be construed as asteroids. The President announced it on Christmas Day; an alien armada was on an intercept course with our planet.

Space probes sent back pictures of their fleet and we bore witness to the immensity of their vessels, each one bristling with bizarre and ominous weapons. To a warring species like man, the holographic images struck a deep, instinctive cord. And that was before the aliens blasted the probes into microscopic pieces.

As the UN hurriedly sent off peace proposals, the generals, buried deep in the war rooms of the world, began preparations of a different kind. Humanity had two generations warning, a span of fifty years. However, evolution had battle-tested our genes. We would fight to the last man, to the last breath . . . to the end.

The scientists realized we couldn't close the technological gap before the aliens arrived, but it didn't stop the generals from trying. In a matter of decades, scores of drones defended the atmosphere, and killer satellites prowled Earth's orbit. Thousands of factories began military fabrication, producing tanks, planes and every manner of projectile weapon. Five billion people received rudimentary training. Millions of landmines bracketed our cities, and even the seas and waterways were seeded with explosive charges. The preparations continued until the last minute.

The water started to boil as I dropped in my last teabag. I used my knife, pitted and scratched as it was, to squeeze every ounce of flavour out of the small packet. A faint cinnamon smell filled the air. The can of spam in my jacket pocket was the last bit of food I managed to procure from a razed strip mall outside Toronto.

"Slowly," I whispered. "Eat slowly." My training kicked in and I tore off tiny pieces.

Slivers of memory of the *Before Time* paraded in front of my mind's eye; sitting around a table with my parents and brother, laughing and joking. I had forgotten the sensation of happiness, of affection.

I groaned and cast the illusion away. The aliens had wiped those pleasantries from the planet, along with most of the population.

My second family was different: raven-haired Jamie, Indian Dave and diminutive Katherine. Selected at the ripe old age of eight, we had been grouped together, taught together . . . injected together.

The generals depended on conventional weaponry, the tanks, planes and weapons of mass destruction. The scientists, however, sought other means. Being human they did what came natural, they searched for a way to cheat. They looked for an edge and what they found was a new type of weapon. Specifically they found me and my cast of thousands, .0001 percent of the population to be exact. We had the abilities they could magnify and manipulate.

The surgery and hormone therapy produced predictable, and some, not so predictable, side effects. I smashed into puberty at ten and those memories still haunt my dreams. By our fourteenth birthdays we could predict tarot cards and memorize phone books. At sixteen we levitated cars without breaking a sweat.

I killed my first person on my twenty-fifth birthday. The unfortunate victim was one of the infamous paparazzi who lingered at the gates of secret government sites, waiting for that singular moment to snap a picture. How he managed to sneak into my room and scare Jamie I'll never know. I woke up and reacted instinctively.

My instructors were ecstatic. They called it a psonic bullet, a tiny packet of anti-matter erupting out of the background quantum field. Like an invisible lightning bolt, the microscopic space-time detonation blew out the back of his skull. His brain was still boiling during the autopsy.

After that, they intensified the augmentation procedures, injecting us with stimulants, neurotransmitters and brain peptides. By the time we hit forty, each of us could kill a squad of soldiers with a single thought.

I ran my fingers along the inside of the can and picked off the last few crumbs. Exhausted, I leaned back against the base of the rock wall and closed my eyes.

The UN sent out an Ambassador as a last ditch effort. He reached the alien fleet ten years out, but before he managed to broadcast his message of peace and cooperation, they reduced his vessel to fused glass and molecular-sized grains of metal.

When the aliens achieved orbit, our vaunted space armada lasted all of six minutes. What wasn't destroyed outright, burned up as it plunged into the atmosphere. Pinpoint laser strikes annihilated the rockets and satellites, while our assault vehicles were pulverized by some kind of fusion bomb. Our weapons never scratched the surface of their ships.

They bombed us from orbit for thirty days, destroying our cities and factories. They knocked our ICBM's out of the sky with contempt and hunted down our newest subs miles under the surface. Humanity took it on the chin but, then again, our bloody past had prepared us well. After millennia of warfare we were nothing, if not tenacious. We crawled underground, licked our wounds, and waited.

After a month of unrelenting nightmare, the massive ships landed. On six continents, they set up military bases and disgorged millions of seven-foot tall warriors in gleaming suits of liquid metal. Heavy fighting vehicles, five stories high, sprouting a confluence of lasers and projectile weapons, led the alien advance into the remnants of our civilization.

That's when we struck back.

We threw our tanks, armoured vehicles and soldiers at them in a wave of fury and defiance. For weeks we battered them with every chemical, biological and projectile weapon in our arsenal. When we finally paused to survey the damage, we hauled our dead away and marvelled at their abilities. Some

type of advanced force field prevented our weapons from reaching their targets. Even our closely guarded nukes caused only a temporary halt in their assault. Once our supply was exhausted, the alien advance continued.

They were relentless and merciless. They did not take prisoners; they did not establish a dialogue. As the war raged, tidbits of information slowly leaked out. From confiscated technology, we learned that they had conquered a thousand worlds in their endless march across the cosmos, enslaving populations or eliminating them utterly. They resembled Earth's arthropods with distinctive head, thorax and abdominal segments, but enclosed in their biomechanical war suits they seemed invincible.

Until they met us.

Our armies were sacrificed like fodder just to get us in striking range. Millions of men and women willingly charged into a maelstrom of laser beams and exploding ordinance. How evolution allowed the altruistic gene to propagate in modern day man was not covered by my limited schooling, but I witnessed it daily in the deaths of my comrades.

Indian Dave disappeared in a chaotic melee outside the ruins of Moscow after his psionic attack wiped out two alien divisions. Even after the arthropods were routed, we could find no trace of my good friend.

We pushed them off the edge of the Americas in a two-month campaign that laid waste to everything east of the Appalachians. That's the last time I saw Katherine. She led the climatic charge that breeched their inner defences and was within seconds of capturing one of the alien ships when the vessel self-destructed, taking half of Long Island with it. I still remember the victorious grin on her face that was captured on the tri-vid, moments before the ship went nova.

I shivered and pulled the fleece jacket tighter around my gaunt frame as a rush of cold air stirred the dank interior of the cave. I took out a small picture from my pocket and shone my penlight on it. The edges were torn and the image faded, but the sight of my friends at the beach still brought a lump to my

throat. Jamie's hair was all messed up and Dave stood knee deep in the water, acting his usual childish self as he cast a set of bunny ears above her head. Katherine was laughing at some unheard joke, and I . . . I had the only serious expression in the crowd. The forced smile was hollow; the hooded eyes too old for my young face. I stared into a dark future.

I'm the last. My friends are dead. The hunters are relentless. Eventually they will find me.

I sighed and returned the picture to my pocket.

After New York, the war with the aliens continued for another six months. We lost billions. We almost lost our civilization and yet at no point did we consider surrender. Survival was inscribed deep within our genetic code. This wasn't a battle for freedom; this was a battle for our very existence.

The final clash outside Beijing was nothing less than genocide. Both sides, bled dry by the constant warfare, refused to relent. When we forced our way onto the mother ship, Jamie and I were on the front edge of the assault wave. My sonic bullet killed a trio of aliens before they could initiate the self-destruct mechanism. We needed that technology in case they returned—

Pebbles scattered across the cavern floor. I froze. In the dark, my augmented senses discerned a faint heartbeat.

"Who's there?" I whispered.

A flashlight clicked on, aimed upwards, and illuminated a young face.

"Are you going to kill me?" he asked.

I sensed something on his person and realized it wouldn't make a difference. "No," I said.

He shrugged as if the answer was inconsequential. "So you won't mind if I approach?"

I couldn't move. The moment seemed surreal. My pulse pounded in my ears, the heavy beat shooting fear not blood through my body.

He took my silence for consent and carefully stepped across the small stream. "You've been hard to find." He tried to make it sound like a compliment.

My light played over his features. He looked young, perhaps all of twenty, with thick lips and a broad nose. He reminded me of Indian Dave.

“How did you do it?” I managed, unsure how this was going to proceed.

“We have trained sensor recon units now,” he said. “Like you psonic warriors, we can detect body signatures from miles away. However we do not have your . . . offensive capabilities.”

“I don’t kill humans,” I snapped.

Despite the light shining into his face, he levelled his eyes at me. “The others did.”

“I’m not like the others.” After all, I was the last of my kind.

“You can’t turn it off,” he continued, ignoring my protest. “It’s part of you, as integral as the motion of your lungs. Eventually, you will use it.”

“But I fought for humanity—”

He held up his hand, forestalling that line of logic. No doubt he had heard it before.

“And we thank you for your sacrifice.” A faint smile crossed his features and I understood in that moment he actually believed what he had been sent here to say. Like me, he had been trained from a young age to do a certain job.

“All of you will be remembered in the history texts and proclaimed heroes. There will be endless accolades bestowed upon your names.” The word posthumously was left unsaid. “But you can no longer live among us.”

Panic threatened to invade my disciplined mind. I barely managed to hold it at bay.

“You’ll need my abilities when they return,” I said.

He shook his head. “We have your DNA. It will be enough. Besides we have captured alien technology to decipher and improve. Next time we will be doubly prepared.”

I took a steadying breath. “There was a friend . . . a girl, around Buffalo.”

He paused. I knew he was gauging how much to tell me.

“One of my colleagues found her. She was found hiding in the ruins of a church outside the city.”

“Jamie,” I moaned. A wave of anguish enveloped me. She said we stood a better chance splitting up . . . that we would meet in the Canadian north.

Something died inside me.

“I’m s . . . sorry,” the young man stammered, momentarily reverting to his age. “I’m told she was . . . formidable.”

A moment of silence passed and his flashlight beam fell to the cavern floor, briefly illuminating a bulky structure strapped to his leg.

“A bomb?” I asked, wiping tears from my eyes.

He nodded. “Something we found on the alien ship. It’s connected to my cardiac myocardium. The moment my heart muscle stops contracting, the explosive mixture goes critical.” He tapped the flashlight gently against it. “It’ll take the top off of this mountain.”

“Of course,” I murmured.

“You are the last,” he confirmed, regaining his composure. “You have served your purpose with honour. But the human race must move on.”

I watched as he reached into a pocket and pulled out a sidearm. “I am going to shoot you now. You may choose to kill me first thus setting off the bomb or you may simply acquiesce and allow it to happen. Would you like a moment to decide?”

I almost laughed at the irony. I could kill the messenger and prove to the military that they were right, that I could not live among my fellow humans anymore. That I was no longer human. Or I could allow the man to walk away, unharmed, and show them just how paranoid they had become. That deep down I retained that human decency.

I pulled out the picture and stared at the raven-haired girl. The image touched off a happy memory and I briefly smiled. The feeling solidified my resolve. Mankind didn’t evolve from a race of

quitters. We would fight to the last man, to the last breath . . . to the end. After millennia of evolution, we were nothing if not tenacious. The species was relentless, merciless and unstoppable. Our species.

I sent the psonic bullet straight into his brain.